TRUTH-SPEAKING; THE FACT VERSUS THE IMPRESSION.

BY CORA LENORE WILLIAMS.

NOW that the god ship Truth, after having ridden many a philosophical gale, seems about to slip her moorings and disappear forever in the treacherous waters of Pragmatism, her sister ship Mathematics should to the rescue; she too may come to need the life line, her topsails, geometrical though they were, having already gone by the board.

With the passing of the Puritanic influence from our religion has come a renaissance of Greek ideals in matters of veracity. For the cultured Greek there were two forms of lying, the honorable and the base; the difference lay in the motive; a lie told in a good cause was not a falsehood.

Of this moral substratum of the Greeks, there are frequent outcroppings in the field of modern literature. Stevenson says that to speak the truth is not to state the true facts, but to convey a true impression; Maeterlinck, that as soon as one is no longer among equal consciences, every truth, to produce the effect of truth, requires focusing; and as still further evidence of this same general conformation, we have the statement from James that our duty to agree with reality is grounded in a perfect jungle of concrete expediences.

Along with the growing scientific habit of facts in all lines of research, there is an increasing tendency to regard facts lightly in matters of personal relation. As man comes to realize the inexorableness of the natural laws to which he is subjected, he would assert his independence by setting his own spiritual standards.

The application of mathematical principles to the problems of ethics should bring about some moral determinations of practical value. The general purport of much present writing on the subject

of moral truth is to place such truth with the empirical sciences, and there is no science to-day but that acknowledges its dependence upon mathematics. From physical geography to political economy, graphical analysis has been found to have great interpretive value and the methods of the calculus are working their way into all lines of research. The ethical chart has been too long in the hands of the impressionists; it stands in need of some strong mathematical lines to clear up the general blur and bring out definite principles of action.

Let us represent the import of a certain incident which you wish to tell me by the length and direction of the line AB.

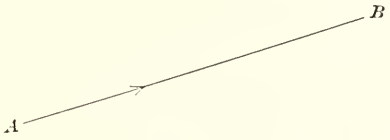

Fig. 1.

This segment stands for the truth in the matter as it appears to you and which you expect by a statement of the facts to convey to me. These facts may be regarded as component forces (for convenience reduced to two) AC and AD applied at A.

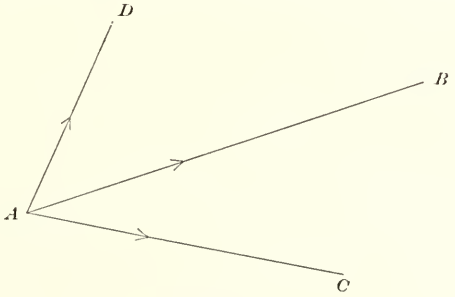

Fig. 2.

The resultant AB is then determined as the diagonal of their parallelogram ACBD. (See Fig. 3.)

Now if these forces, AC and AD, were entirely under your control there would be no question as to the effect. It were then as simple a matter as it is generally supposed to be to speak the truth. But through some ignorance or prejudice on my part, a deflection or change in magnitude may take place in one or both components, so that I get quite another impression AB′ from the one AB that you intended I should receive. (See Fig. 4.)

You have spoken the facts but I have not heard the truth.

Or again there may be factors bearing on the case, of so subtle and elusive a nature, that while you feel intuitively their importance, you know yourself unable through lack of expression to give them their due weight. In either case if you have an eye single to the truth of the impression you wish to make, you will be impelled to

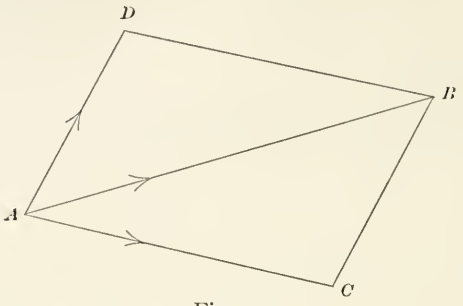

Fig. 3.

alter the forces at your command to avoid the probable error on the part of the hearer. Then if you have made the proper correction, we shall have the same resultant AB from a different set of components AC_1, AD_1. (See Fig. 5.)

The moral issue in the problem is evidently one with the mathematical, and for the pragmatist has its solution, as far as our parallelo-

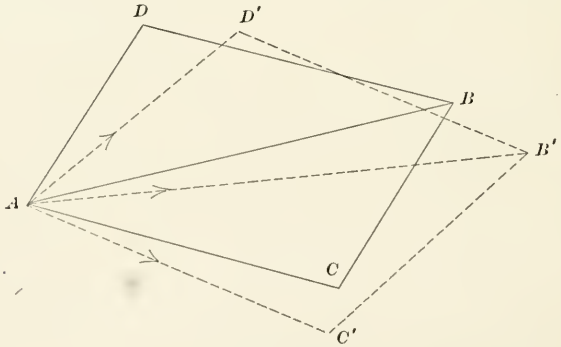

Fig. 4.

gram represents it, in any set of components that will give the correct resultant.

But at this juncture I hear the mathematician ask of his coworker, the moralist, "What of the forces of reaction, are they not operative in your world as in mine?" "Certainly," that other replies, "should the speaker fail in his computations for the making

of the correct impression, his veracity will stand in danger of being questioned. A lie that has its origin in a bad judgment carries with it the same consequences as the lie that comes from a bad purpose. However great one's desire to hit the bull's eye of truth, to the extent that he falls short of the mark, is he handicapped in his future efforts to make it, for his errors are sooner or later

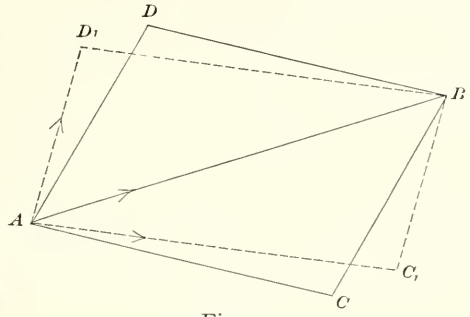

Fig. 5.

attributed to unworthy motives and corrections in turn made on his statements. But any power may be misdirected; ignorance has merely its attendant penalty in this as in other functions of life." The mathematician here interposes, "Let us grant that the desired goal has been gained with all good intent, even then I fear we shall find deleterious results coming from the forces of reaction. Inas-

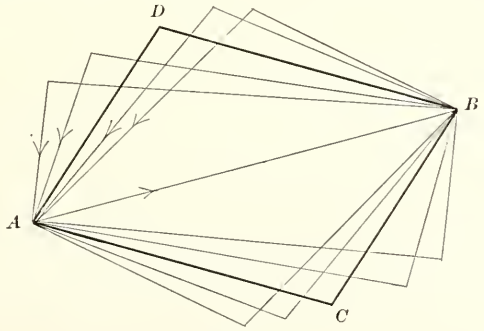

Fig. 6.

much as the angle of deflection for any particular component must change for each recipient, if the resultant in question is to remain a constant, there will in time come about a disintegration of the standard component (the fact as it was originally known to the speaker) through its various substitutes striking it on their return at all angles.

In that the deflections have been made in the cause of truth, there is the greater danger that the truth should be lost. There are no compunctions of conscience to keep it in sight as in the falsehood that knows itself false."

The reality for any one is his experience as it stands in his own mind. If the images of that experience in the minds of others when reflected back do not merge into and strengthen the original image, they will blur its outlines, if they do not destroy it altogether. A disassociation of personality with all its attendant evils is likely to follow as a consequence. A weak character must needs anchor itself firmly to the facts, if it would attain to an individuality of its own.

That the making of a correct impression has come to take precedence of the speaking of the fact is due largely to our consideration for others. Ours is a religion of altruism whose charity covers a multitude of sins including that greatest of all sins, ignorance. The Greeks lied to protect the weak; we lie so as to foster the weakness itself. How frequently we say, "I could not tell him the truth for he would not understand." At times it may be necessary to sacrifice one's truth, as it is at times necessary to sacrifice one's health, for others; we should, however, not do so in the name of truth but of the other moral obligation that for the time being we rightly or wrongly place above the truth.

The problem of truth-speaking is so closely correlated with that of truth-hearing that the two should be considered as one. The injunction to speak the truth should be preceded by the one to hear the truth. How often do we find ourselves unable to give utterance to the fact through the consciousness of an ear that will not understand. In the strained moments of a close friendship or of family relations, a falsehood is frequently invoked by an unsympathetic attitude. As Thoreau says, it takes two to tell the truth, one to speak it, and one to hear it. A child knowing that he will suffer misinterpretation, if not injustice, for the reason that his motives can not be understood, in his impotence hurls a lie into the very face of the facts themselves. Nor are such obliquities peculiar to children. Most of us recall humiliating incidents of the kind in our grown-up experience. Mr. George Gissing in his Ryecroft Papers gives one so apropos of the point in hand that I quote it in its entirety.

"At an inn in the north I once heard three men talking at their breakfast on the question of diet. They agreed that most people ate too much meat, and one of them went so far as to declare that, for

his part, he preferred vegetables and fruit. 'Why,' he said, 'will you believe me that I sometimes make a breakfast of apples?' This announcement was received in silence; evidently the two listeners didn't quite know what to think of it. Thereupon the speaker, in rather a blustering tone cried out, 'Yes, I can make a good breakfast on two or three pounds of apples.'

"Wasn't it amusing? And wasn't it characteristic? This honest Briton had gone too far in frankness. 'Tis all very well to like fruit and vegetables up to a certain point; but to breakfast on apples! His companions' silence proved that they were a little ashamed of him; his confession savored of poverty or meanness; to right himself in their opinion, nothing better occurred to the man than to protest that he ate apples, yes, but not merely one or two; he ate them largely, by the pound."

We should prepare ourselves to receive the truth as we prepare ourselves to speak the truth. To tell another the truth as it is known to you, is to offer him the highest recognition of equality with yourself. To hear the truth as it is told you is to establish that equality in the fullest sense.